

‘The Eagle’s Oars are Feathers’ – Skaldic Practice and Perception Beyond Performance

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One of the perennial mysteries of Old Norse skaldic poetry is how skalds learned to compose such complex verses. The medieval Icelandic sagas feature a multitude of characters who compose skaldic poetry, many of whom appear to have been capable of improvising intricate skaldic verses in response to events that are happening around them, such as Egill Skalla-Grímsson, who even at the age of three is said to have improvised kenning-rich verses, such as this one in response to the actions of his grandfather Yngvarr:

Síþogla gaf sǫglum
sárgagls þrjá Agli
hirðimeðr við hróðri
hagr brimrótar gagra,
ok bekkþiðurs blakka
borðvallar gaf fjorða
kennimeðr, sás kunni,
kǫrbeð, Egil gleðja.¹

¹ *Egils saga*, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), p. 45; ‘The wound-goslings’ herding-tree [WARRIOR]

This particular episode is, like many of its kind in the sagas, likely to be exaggerated for literary effect. However, it attests to the idea that skalds' ability to communicate ideas in intricate metre and metaphor was almost second nature – something which recurs throughout the Old Norse literary corpus.

However, the sagas remain oddly silent on exactly how skalds acquired their skills, or how they practiced them, with *practice* here being used in the sense of developing and refining their grasp of the techniques of skaldic diction outside of the realm of recitation.² This has been noted by Elena Gurevich, who comments:

All the technical features of skaldic poetry testify to the necessity of special training of practitioner. “Poetic inspiration” [...] accompanied by some knowledge of tradition [...] could hardly be enough to produce this highly complicated poetry [...] but] the Old Norse sources completely ignore the problem of young poets' training [...] Instead they try to convince us that

gave three ever-silent dogs of the ocean floor [SEA-SNAILS] to the talkative Egill for his praise. The knowing-tree of the horses of the field of planks [WARRIOR], who knew how to gladden Egill, gave as the fourth gift the chosen bed of the brook-grouse [DUCK'S EGG]'. All translations from Old Norse are my own.

² ‘practice, n. 4’, *OED Online*

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/149226?rskey=AmkXAI&result=1&isAdvanced=false>> [accessed 7 May 2018].

everybody capable of composing skaldic verses simply possessed this ability.³

Judy Quinn has also commented on this phenomenon, stating that ‘[l]ittle is known about the traditional training of skalds or the theoretical discourse that enabled the cultivation and oral transmission of vernacular poetics.’⁴ Yet although the *process* of skaldic pedagogy is obscure certain medieval Icelandic texts, including the twelfth-century *Háttalykill* attributed to Jarl Rognvaldr of Orkney and the Icelandic skald Hallr Þórarinnsson; the thirteenth century *Prose Edda* attributed to Snorri Sturluson; and the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, attributed to Snorri’s nephew, Óláfr Þórðarson, attest to the existence of some form of training in the comprehension, if not the composition, of skaldic verse by the time that they were written.⁵

³ Elena Gurevich, ‘Ok varð it mesta skáld: Some Observations on the Problem of Skaldic Training’, *Collegium Medievale: Tverrfaglig tidsskrift for middelaldersforskning*, 1–2 (1996), 57–71 (p. 62).

⁴ Judy Quinn, ‘Eddu list: The Emergence of Skaldic Pedagogy in Medieval Iceland’, *Alvíssmál*, 4 (1994 [1995]), 69–92 (p. 69).

⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál 1. Introduction, Text, and Notes*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998); Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Háttatal*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007); Rognvaldr jarl and Hallr Þórarinnsson, ‘Háttalykill’, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade and Edith Marold, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, 3 (Brepols, Turnhout, 2017), pp. 1001–93; hereafter ‘Háttalykill’; *Dritte grammatische Abhandlung: der isländische Text nach den Handschriften AM748 I, 4^o und Codex Wormianus*, ed. by Björn

Although *Háttalykill* survives only in later paper manuscripts, it is attributed to jarl Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson and Hallr Þórarinnsson by *Orkneyinga saga*.⁶ Although the poem itself makes it clear that it is concerned with recounting the deeds of traditional heroes, proclaiming ‘forn frœði lætk | framm of borin’,⁷ the form of the poem is something of an innovation. It displays over 41 verse-forms, some traditionally skaldic and some imported from foreign literature, particularly Latin poetry.⁸ Indeed, the name *Háttalykill* is itself a play on the Latin term *clavis metrica*, a didactic genre of poem used to teach metre. Thus, it has been argued that this poem signals a turning point in Old West Norse literary culture, whereby the poetry and poetics of the elites began to acquire a cosmopolitan and scholarly flavour, influenced by the pedagogical practices of the Continental European schoolroom and its approach to Latin poetics.⁹

Magnus Olsen and Thomas Krömmelbein, *Studia Nordica*, 3 (Oslo: Novus Forlag, 1998).

⁶ *Orkneyinga saga*, ed. by Finnbogi Guðmundsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 34 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1965), pp. 1–300 (p. 185).

⁷ ‘Háttalykill’, p. 1009; ‘I will bring forth old wisdom’.

⁸ *Háttalykill enn forni*, ed. by Jón Helgason and Anne Holtsmark, Bibliotheca Arnarnaganaeana, 1 (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1941), p. 118.

⁹ Paul Bibire, ‘The Poetry of Earl Rognvald’s Court’, in *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney’s Twelfth-Century Renaissance*, ed. by Barbara E. Crawford (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), pp. 208–40 (p. 217); Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘Snorris frœði’, in *Snorrastefna*, 25.–27. júlí 1990, ed. by Úlfar Bragason, Rit Stofnunar Sigurðar Nordals, 1 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Sigurðar Nordals, 1992), pp. 270–83 (p. 279); Guðrún

‘The Eagle’s Oars are Feathers’

This attitude continued through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, influencing others such as Snorri Sturluson. *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*, two parts of the *Prose Edda*, directly address skaldic composition, looking at the two branches of Old Norse poetics – ‘mál ok hættir’, lexicon and metre.¹⁰ In fact, *Skáldskaparmál* explicitly states that it was intended for the education of aspiring skalds:

En þetta er nú at segja ungum skáldum þeim er girnask at nema mál skáldskapar ok heyja sér orðfjöldða með fornum heitum eða girnask þeir at kunna skilja þat er hulit er kveðit.¹¹

The *Third Grammatical Treatise*, meanwhile, draws heavily upon the classical grammatical treatises by Donatus and Priscian, which were part of the pedagogic traditions of Christian Europe. Thus, as Judy Quinn notes, both texts ‘illuminate the way the discourse of poetics was being constituted during this dynamic period of Icelandic literary history, and how the pedagogic impulse of Latin textbooks was being taken up within the vernacular tradition.’¹²

Nordal, *The Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2001), pp. 29–36.

¹⁰ *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 5.

¹¹ *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 5; ‘And now to speak to those young skalds who are eager to study the language of poetry and increase their vocabularies with the traditional poetic terms, or yearn to make clear that which is obscurely spoken.’

¹² Quinn, ‘Eddu list’, p. 69.

However, although these texts suggest that skaldic poetics were being taught in the thirteenth-century Icelandic schoolroom, the corpus of skaldic poetry extends far beyond these boundaries in terms of time and space. How then, did skalds practise beyond the walls of the medieval Icelandic schoolroom? One possible answer can be found in the runic inscription found on Lund Benstykke 4. As this is a single source, the following discussion should not be uncritically extrapolated into an overarching statement on Old Norse poetry and poetics. Yet, when viewed through the lens of oral poetic theory and current research into language and perception, it raises interesting considerations regarding skaldic practice prior and parallel to those suggested by twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic grammatical texts.

Lund Benstykke 4, as the name suggests, is a stick of bone, approximately 16cm long and 2.5cm wide, found in Lund in 1938. It uses a medieval runic alphabet, or *fupark*, and has been dated somewhere between the years 1050 and 1300. Both sides of the stick feature an inscription in Old Danish.¹³ Side A reads: **ᚼᚱᚢᚩᚱ + ᚱᚢᚩ + ᚢᚩ + ᚱᚢᚩᚱ + ᚱᚢᚩᚱ, bōndi:ris:ti:mal:runu**, *Bóndi risti malrunu*; and Side B reads: **ᚱᚱᚱ + ᚱᚱᚱ + ᚱᚱᚱ + ᚱᚱᚱᚱᚱᚱ, arar:ara:æru:fiaprar**, *Arar ara eru fjaðrar*. The runes themselves are relatively clear, and no significantly alternative readings have been proposed. The Side A inscription is relatively commonplace, naming Bóndi, and proclaiming his act of carving runes. This kind of inscription appears throughout the corpus of Germanic

¹³ ‘Lund Benstykke 4’, *Danske Runindskrifter*,
<http://runer.ku.dk/VisGenstand.aspx?Titel=Lund-benstykke_4>
[accessed 11 January 2018].

runes, from Migration Period bracteates, to Viking Age runestones, to medieval bone sticks such as this one.¹⁴ It is the inscription on Side B which holds potential clues regarding skaldic practice.

Arar ara eru fjaðrar is a metrical inscription in keeping with many techniques found in skaldic verse. The first three words, starting with vowels, all alliterate with one another, and this side of the inscription is heavily invested in internal rhyme, as *ara* and *eru* feature *skothending* – partial internal rhyme based on consonants – and *arar* and *fjaðrar* feature a fuller internal rhyme based on the word-final syllable *-rar*.¹⁵ In addition to this, Side B’s inscription also appears to be an explanation of a kenning: the oars of the eagle are feathers, which can be rendered as a kenning-type: <oar> of <bird> [FEATHER].¹⁶ Kennings are one of

¹⁴ Judith Jesch, ‘Runes and Verse: The Medialities of Early Scandinavian Poetry’, *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies*, 47 (2017), 181–202, gives a number of Late Iron Age runic inscriptions from Scandinavia and Anglo-Saxon England, several of which identify the runes’ carver.

¹⁵ For an overview of skaldic metres, see Kari Ellen Gade, ‘General Introduction §4.3, Skaldic metres’, in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, ed. by Diana Whaley, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, 1, 2 vols (Brepols, Turnhout, 2012), I, pp. lvii–lxiv.

¹⁶ This orthographic rendition of the kenning-type adheres to that used in my MA thesis. Triangular brackets indicate semantic fields for the base-word(s) and determinant(s), and the capital letters and square brackets indicate the referent. See Kathryn A. Haley-Halinski, ‘Kennings in Mind and Memory: Cognitive Poetics and Skaldic Verse’ (unpublished MA thesis, Universitetet i Oslo, 2017). PDF available at <<https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/58862>> [accessed 8 May 2018].

the defining features of skaldic diction, and are short phrases that consist of two or more nouns that are used to replace another noun in the stanza.¹⁷ In its most basic form, a kenning has three parts. There is the implicit referent, which is the thing to which the kenning refers; there is the base-word, which metaphorically stands in for the referent; and there is the determinant, which is usually in the genitive and serves to narrow down the semantic range of the base-word by being metonymically attached to the referent.¹⁸ Thus, although the base-word *oars* could potentially stand in for multiple referents, the presence of the determinant

¹⁷ Edith Marold, 'General Introduction §5.1, Kenning', in *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, I, pp. lxx–lxxxv (p. lxx).

¹⁸ Marold, 'General Introduction §5.1, Kenning', p. lxx; with reference to the definition of kennings as 'ein zweigliedriger Ersatz für ein Substantiv der gewöhnlichen Rede' in Meissner, p. 2. See also Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Cognitive Approach to Skaldic Poetics, from Snorri to Vigfússon and Beyond', in *Úr dölum til dala: Guðbrandur Vigfússon Centenary Essays*, ed. by Rory McTurk and Andrew Wawn, Leeds Texts and Monographs New Series, 11 (Leeds: Leeds Studies in English, 1999), pp. 267–86 (p. 276). Andreas Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung*, 2nd edn (Potsdam: Athenaion, 1941), p. 296 states that true kennings are solely metaphorical in nature; an argument supported in Frederic Amory, 'Kennings, Referentiality, and Metaphors,' *ANF*, 130 (1987), 87–101. However, a strictly metaphorical definition misrepresents kennings, as many incorporate metonymy in cases such as *nomen agentis* kennings, which characterise referents through behaviour, described in Rudolf Meissner, *Die Kenningar der Skalden: Ein Beitrag zur skaldischen Poetik* (Bonn and Leipzig: Kurt Schroeder, 1921), pp. 283–332, or *viðkenningar*, which characterise a specific entity through unique characteristics such as kinship-links, described in *Skáldskaparmál*, p. 107.

eagle means that the interpretation is restricted to the things that steer an eagle; its wing- and tail-feathers. The term *kenning-type* refers to a semantic formula which can be filled in with any number of synonyms, such as *eagle* for the semantic field <bird> in this case.¹⁹ The kenning-type <oar> of <bird> [FEATHER] is otherwise unattested in the skaldic corpus, although there is a similar kenning in the twelfth-century poem *Haraldsdrápa II*, by Einarr Skúlason, where a sail is referred to as *ráfiðri* – sailyard-feather.²⁰ Thus, the semantic fields and associations Lund Benstykke 4 uses do appear related to other kennings attested to in the skaldic corpus.

In the twentieth century, scholars took an interest in studying kennings as a system, and following the work of Bjarne Fidjestøl, it is generally thought that kennings operated as a paralinguistic system, building upon ordinary language-use. This system operated on a strict series of rules and formulae regarding referents and the base-words and determinants that could be used to reach them.²¹ This means that, with enough practice, one could gain communicative competence – meaning the ability to send and receive information through a given semiotic system – as the

¹⁹ Bjarne Fidjestøl, ‘The Kenning System. An Attempt at a Linguistic Analysis’, in *Bjarne Fidjestøl: Selected Papers*, ed. by Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal, trans. by Peter Foote (Odense: Odense University Press, 1997), pp. 16–68 (pp. 17–20).

²⁰ Einarr Skúlason, *Haraldsdrápa II* 4:2, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, in *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), II, pp. 544–48 (p. 547).

²¹ Fidjestøl, pp. 16–68; with reference to Meissner.

rules regarding boundaries of meaning in the kenning-system were shared between the speech-community of skalds, performers, and audience-members.²² The purpose of this kenning-system was twofold: on the one hand, it was a verbal art form that showcased the skald's vocabulary and command of poetic techniques. On the other hand, as John Lindow has argued, it is likely that the kenning-system as it is known today was an elite version of Old Norse poetic practice, and that complex skaldic diction acted as a kind of marker to show who was part of the courtly in-group.²³

The presence of kennings in a runic inscription is, in itself, not unusual – the oldest known source that contains something that could be a kenning is often thought to be *walhakurne*, written in the Elder Futhork on the Migration Period Tjurkö I bracteate and interpreted as *foreign corn*, meaning *gold*; and several fourteenth-century runic inscriptions such as N B548 from Bryggen appear to be skaldic compositions containing kennings.²⁴ It is the fact that this inscription explains a kenning that is remarkable, given the characteristic reticence of Old Norse

²² Dell Hymes, 'On Communicative Competence', in *Sociolinguistics: Selected Readings*, ed. by John B. Pride and Janet Holmes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 269–93.

²³ John Lindow, 'Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry', *SS*, 47.3 (1975), 211–327 (pp. 321–23).

²⁴ 'IK 184', *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit 1,2*, ed. by Karl Hauck et al. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1985), p. 316; 'N B548M', *Samnordisk Runtextdatabas*

<<http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>> [Accessed 22 January 2018].

sources on the subject of how skaldic competence was obtained discussed above. Some scholars have suggested that the *þulur*, metrical lists of names, could have served as ‘a database of partially-digested information’ to be used by scholars and poets to cue recall of mythological figures and narratives – information relevant to the formation of kennings, and that kennings were improvised from these vocabulary-lists.²⁵ This may help in understanding how the wide vocabulary of Old Norse words exclusive to poetry was perpetuated, but it still doesn’t explain how the kenning-system itself was memorised.

Yet Lund Benstykke 4 arguably holds a clue as to how competence was gained in the kenning-system itself. This inscription has a very tightly-knit metrical structure, and according to theories of oral poetics, alliteration and rhyme both act as strong memory-cues in the recitation of oral poetry, especially when used in conjunction with meaning, as the meaning of a phrase and the sound-patterning of the poem both act to limit the possible word-choices.²⁶ A Modern English example would be reciting the short rhyming phrase ‘Never Eat Shredded Wheat’ to recall the order of compass points. Thus, Lund Benstykke 4 could be seen as a rare written attestation of one method of skaldic practice, in which short metrical sayings

²⁵ Christopher Abram, ‘Einarr Skúlason, Snorri Sturluson, and the Post-Pagan Mythological Kenning’, in *Eddic, Skaldic, and Beyond: Poetic Variety in Medieval Iceland and Norway*, ed. by Martin Chase (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 44–61 (p. 58).

²⁶ David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-Out Rhymes* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 65–89.

were composed in order to memorise the formulae that underpinned the kenning-system, with the metrical nature of each phrase cueing recall.²⁷ This would be in keeping with Gurevich's theory that skalds were trained orally, by exchanges between a master and their apprentice, as such mnemonic phrases could have been transmitted orally between skalds with relative ease.²⁸

This method of memorising and internalising kenning-formula may well have had wider implications for skaldic practitioners' perceptions of the world. The theory of linguistic relativism, that language determines beliefs, norms, and values, and even an individual's perceptions of reality, in accordance with the concepts and structures favoured by a given language, has been hotly debated in the field of cognitive linguistics, and current research favours that idea that 'language may not replace,

²⁷ Although he does not discuss metrical kenning-type explanations such as the one being considered here, Frog, 'Metrical Entanglement and Dróttkvætt Composition – a Pilot Study on Battle-Kennings', in *Approaches to Nordic and Germanic Poetry*, ed. by Kristján Árnason et al. (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2016), pp. 149–229 (pp. 164–65), discusses the process of learning skaldic *langue* through exemplars such as those found in the *Prose Edda*.

²⁸ Gurevich, p. 68. Gurevich also cites the common metaphor of poetry as a drink in skaldic verse. Judy Quinn, 'Liquid Knowledge: Traditional Conceptualisations of Learning in Eddic Poetry', in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, their Relations and their Implications*, ed. by Slávica Rankovic, Leidulf Melve and Else Mundal (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 183–226 (p. 183) also discusses the metaphor of knowledge as a drink in oral cultures such as Old Norse poetic traditions.

but instead may put in place, representational systems that make certain kinds of thinking possible.'²⁹ Thus, skalds who internalised kenning-formulae through mnemonic techniques did more than memorise stock phrases in the manner often discussed in relation to oral formulaic poetry. Rather, skalds who internalised the metalanguage of the kenning-system may have acquired a kind of conceptual double-vision. In this, the referents, base-words, and determinants of kennings were seen simultaneously as their ordinary, everyday selves, and as being related to one another as part of a cluster of potential kenning-elements.

This conceptual double-vision is not as improbable as it sounds. According to the cognitive linguistic hypothesis of conceptual metaphor theory, metaphors are a foundational element of human thought:

Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature [... and our] conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities [...] the

²⁹ Philip Wolff and Kevin J. Holmes, 'Linguistic relativity', *Wiley interdisciplinary reviews: Cognitive science*, 2.3 (2011), 253–65 (p. 261). Similar conclusions are reached in John A. Lucy, 'Recent Advances in the Study of Linguistic Relativity in Historical Context: A Critical Assessment', *Language Learning*, 66.3 (2016), 487–515; and Gary Lupyan, 'The Centrality of Language in Human Cognition', *Language Learning*, 66.3 (2016), 516–53.

way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.³⁰

Humans often use metaphors based on bodily or social experiences to conceptualise abstract ideas by mapping the similarities between source (bodily/social experience) and target (abstract concept).³¹ Cognitive metaphor theory has been criticised, particularly in its prioritisation of bodily metaphors over culturally-constructed ones.³² However, it has been successfully employed in discussions of how the kenning system operated in the minds of skalds and their audiences, as ‘from a cognitive linguistic point of view, basic kenning patterns and their linguistic realisations are grounded in entrenched conceptual metaphors. These metaphors may be more or less ‘alive’ depending on the surrounding verse context.’³³ Thus, in

³⁰ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003 [1980]), p. 3.

³¹ Lakoff and Johnson, pp. 5, 16–22.

³² Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 4, 11.

³³ Deborah Potts, *A Cognitive Approach to the Analysis of the Extant Corpus of Kennings for Poetry* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2012), p. 3. An ‘alive’ metaphor is one that is still actively generating meaning in language and culture, while a ‘dead’ metaphor is one that consists of perhaps one or two conventionally fixed expressions but does not actively generate meaning or structure thoughts beyond these. See Lakoff and Johnson, pp. 55–56. For an overview of several cognitive linguistic theories of metaphor and their potential applications in the study of kennings, see Haley-Halinski, pp. 14–21.

the same way that many Anglophone people see anger as hot and sadness as dark, Bóndi could have been culturally conditioned to perceive feathers as an eagle’s oars. This in turn could account for the ways in which characters in sagas are portrayed as having an almost preternatural ability to rapidly improvise skaldic verses complete with kennings. Practiced skalds possessed a linguistically-altered perceptual framework, where objects in the world around them served as mnemonic cues for clusters of predetermined kenning-elements. They were, in a sense, already perceiving in a skaldic mode.

As already mentioned, there are issues with extrapolating the implications of Lund Benstykke 4 to the entirety of the skaldic corpus. Lund Benstykke 4 has no analogous medieval inscriptions, and furthermore, it is an inscription from medieval Denmark. This poses two issues: firstly, although metrical inscriptions are known from Denmark, and literary sources do suggest that skalds worked at and were appreciated by Danish courts during the Viking Age, the skaldic corpus as it is known today is the product of West Norse (Icelandic and Norwegian) skalds, with East Norse (Danish and Swedish) literary practice almost completely out of the picture.³⁴

Secondly, the social position of runes and their inscribers changed from 1050 to 1300. If Lund Benstykke 4 is from the

³⁴ Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), pp. 2–3; ‘Runic Poetry’, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages database*, <<http://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/m.php?p=runic>> [accessed 11 January 2018] gives a list of metrical runic inscriptions, including filters for region and time period.

earlier end of this period, it is more likely that it is the result of somebody using runes to make a note. If it is from the thirteenth century, however, the use of runes and kennings are more likely to be a piece of learned antiquarianism. Medieval Danish interest in runes experienced a revival in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century royal court, starting with Valdemar I and carrying on with his son, Valdemar II.³⁵ Saxo Grammaticus commented on this cultural phenomenon in several places in the *Gesta Danorum*, stating that the Danes recorded historical events in runes, and recounting an episode where King Valdemar I sent some people to record and interpret a runic inscription at Blekinge.³⁶ In addition to this, the *Third Grammatical Treatise* by Óláfr Þórðarson includes sections on runes and skaldic verse, and it is said in *Knýtlinga saga* that Óláfr Þórðarson underwent scholarly training at the court of Valdemar II.³⁷ With this in mind, Rikke Steenholt Olesen argues that in medieval Denmark, runic and Latinate literacy were both largely the preserve of the clergy.³⁸ On the other hand, the vernacular, prosaic, and occasionally even

³⁵ Discussed in Tarrin Wills, 'The Thirteenth-Century Runic Revival in Denmark and Iceland', *North-Western European Language Evolution*, 69.2 (2016), 114–29.

³⁶ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, ed. by Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. by Peter Fisher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 4–7, 12–13.

³⁷ Óláfr Þórðarson, pp. 60–72; 'Knýtlinga saga', in *Danakonunga sogur*, ed. by Bjarni Guðnason, Íslenzk fornrit, 35 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1982), pp. 91–321 (p. 315).

³⁸ Rikke Steenholt Olesen, 'Runic Amulets from Medieval Denmark', *Futhark*, 1 (2010), 167–174 (pp. 173–74).

obscene nature of the medieval rune-sticks found in Bryggen suggest that runic literacy was a more widespread phenomenon in Norway, even if this may not have been the case elsewhere in the Norse cultural area.³⁹ It is not known who Bóndi was, and whether he was a highly-educated, socially-elite poet who viewed skaldic verse and runes as antiquarian curios, one of the largely lost voices of non-elite poetry making a record of a mnemonic kenning-explanation, a passing Norwegian, or someone else entirely.

If a dating based upon Norwegian runes is used, it does appear that Lund Benstykke 4 might be from the thirteenth century. In the thirteenth century, the long-twig and short-twig fuparks were merged to create the medieval runic inventory.⁴⁰ Lund Benstykke 4 uses a short-twig a-rune and a long-twig æ-rune, and a long-twig o-rune with double strokes to represent the long ó, although this character was usually used to represent the phoneme [ø]. This dating is – as mentioned – somewhat speculative,⁴¹ yet it is rather likely that Bóndi was writing in the thirteenth century at the earliest. If this is the case, this runic inscription containing a kenning-explanation could be an erudite scholarly exercise in runes and skaldic poetics, rather than an example of traditional skaldic practice. Ultimately, the lack of

³⁹ Examples include ‘N B1 M’, ‘N B11 M’, ‘N B17 M’, and ‘N B149’, *Samnordisk Runtextdatabas* [Accessed 22nd January 2018].

⁴⁰ Lars Magnar Enoksen, *Runor: historia, tydning, tolkning* (Falun: Historiska Media, 1998), p. 136.

⁴¹ Olesen, p. 162 comments that the grouping of Danish runic inscriptions into ‘early’ and ‘late’ medieval based upon linguistic or runological features has become increasingly difficult as finds increase.

analogous objects from medieval Denmark or elsewhere in Scandinavia leaves it unclear as to whether such mnemonic phrases were widely used to internalise skaldic diction.

In conclusion, extrapolating the conclusions drawn here from Lund Benstykke 4 to the wider skaldic corpus should be done with caution. It is hard to reconstruct oral traditions due to the lack of physical evidence left behind, and this is the case for much skaldic verse and the traditions accompanying it. However, when looked at through the lens of cognitive research into memory, language, and perception, the inscription on Lund Benstykke 4 becomes a very tempting piece to fit into the puzzle of how skalds acquired and polished the skills necessary to compose and perform skaldic verse. If metrical phrases such as these were used to memorise and even internalise the conceptual metaphors underpinning the kenning-system, such a linguistic system could, over time, have created a kind of language-enhanced cognition whereby skalds perceived the elements of the kenning-system as cues for the elements they were related to, thus facilitating metrical and lexical improvisations within the strict parameters of skaldic diction.